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[54] PROCESS AND APPARATUS FOR
REDUCING ELECTRODE WEAR IN A
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1990, Pat. No. 5,070,227.[51] Int. Cl.⁵ B23K 9/00[52] U.S. Cl. 219/121.550; 219/121.57;
219/121.51[58] Field of Search 219/121.48, 121.51,
219/121.54, 121.55, 121.57, 75, 76.16

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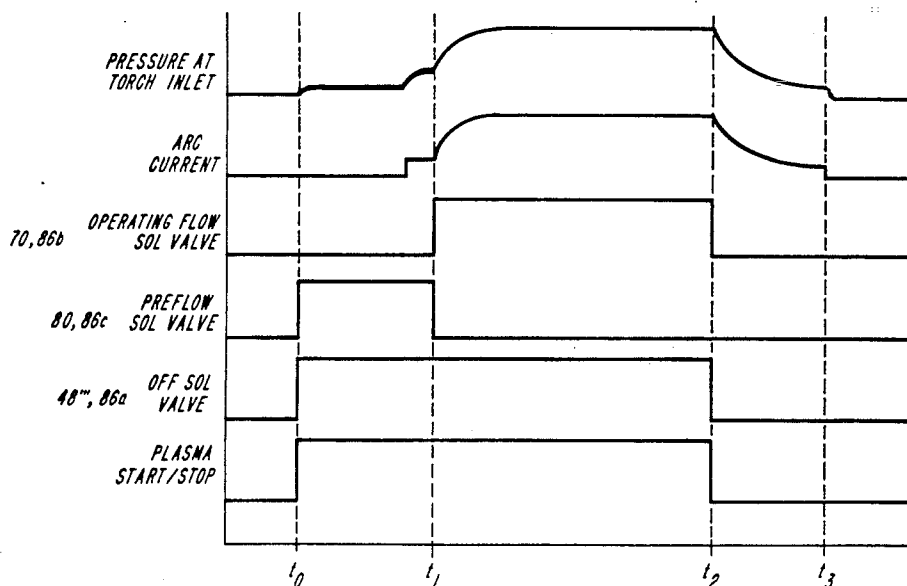
Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Wolf, Greenfield & Sacks

[57]

ABSTRACT

A process and apparatus for reducing wear of an electrode in a plasma arc torch involves altering the gas flow in a plasma chamber surrounding the electrode immediately before and continuing after cutting of the current that sustains the arc. The altering includes closing off the gas flow upstream of the chamber, switching from a swirling flow to a radial/axial flow through the plasma chamber, reducing the arc current level in conjunction with either of the above, the venting the plasma chamber to rapidly change the gas flow and pressure in the chamber. The interval is sufficient to reduce electrode wear, but short enough that the arc remains stabilized until cut-off. In the flow stop mode, a solenoid valve is placed on an inlet tube for the plasma gas. Flow altering also occurs on start up. A gas preflow is established prior to pilot arc ignition. On transfer, the flow increases to its full operating value in conjunction with an increase in the arc current. The preflow can be axial, or partially axial. Also, the type or composition of the gas used in the preflow and in the operating flow can change during the start up from a less reactive to more reactive gas.

32 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



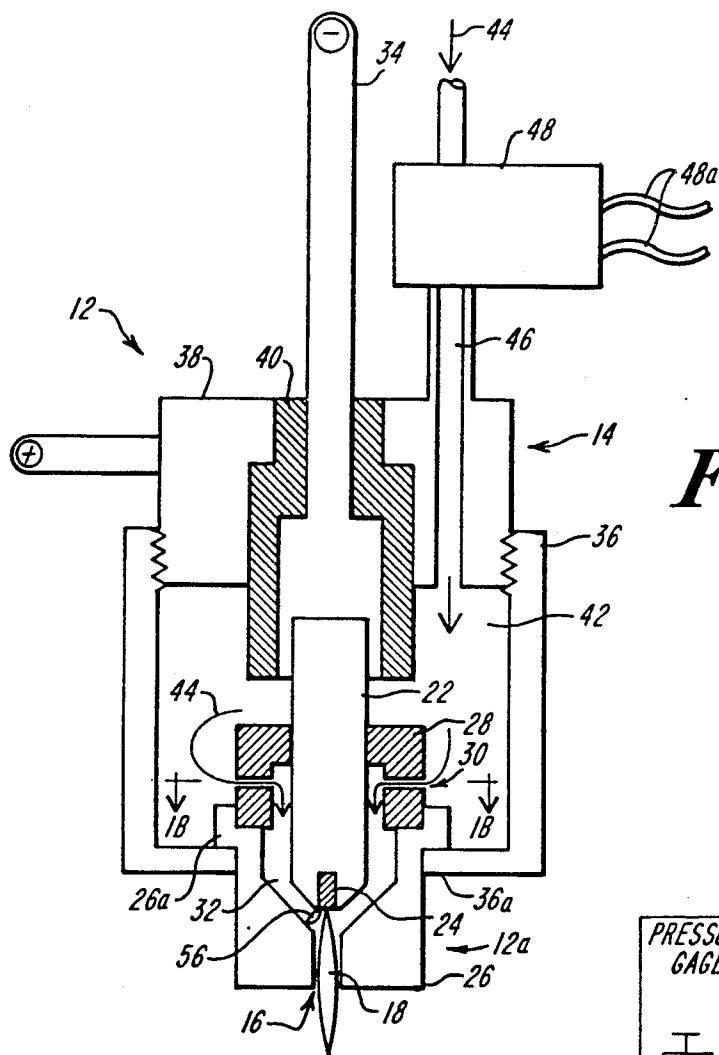


FIG. 1A

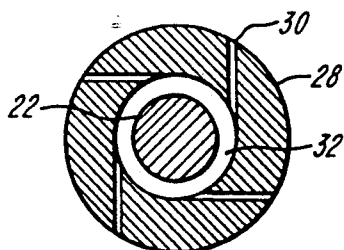


FIG. 1B

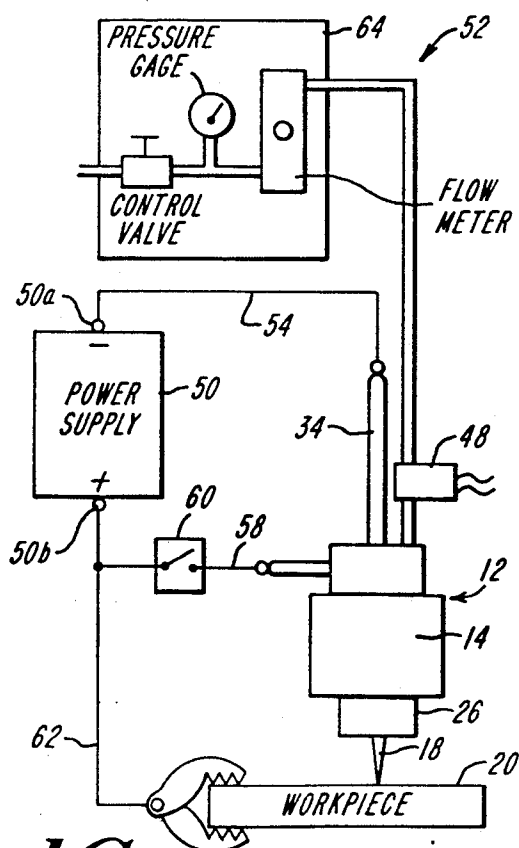


FIG. 1C

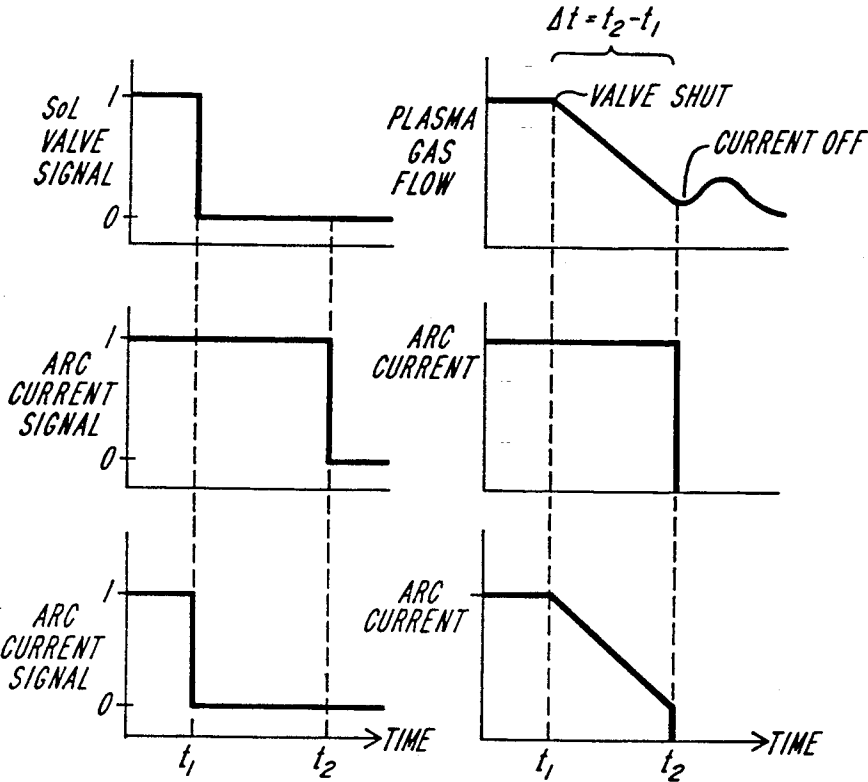


FIG. 1D

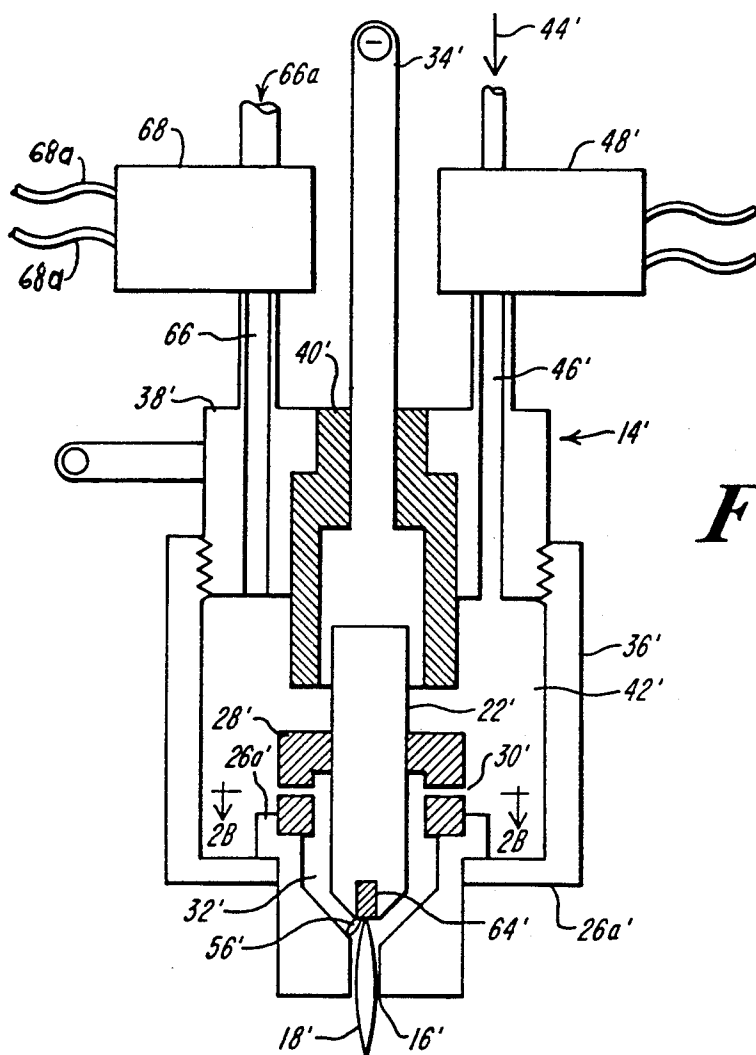


FIG. 2A

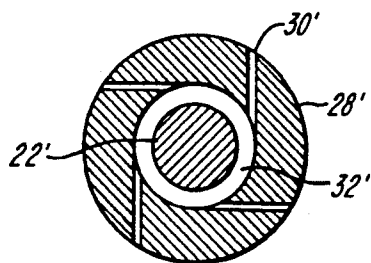


FIG. 2B

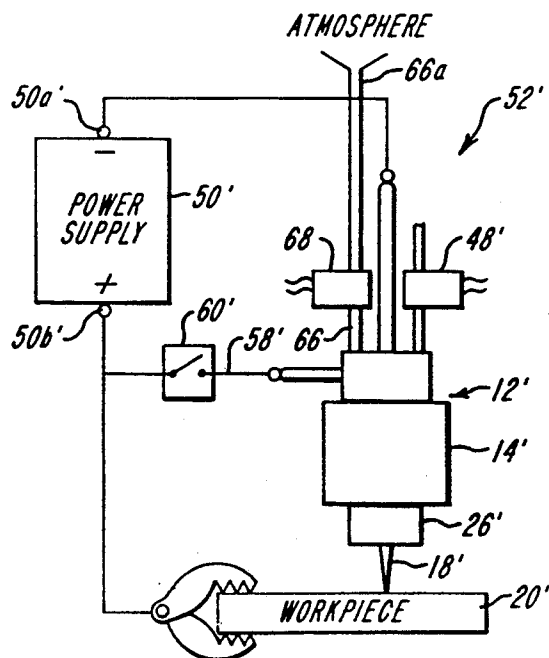
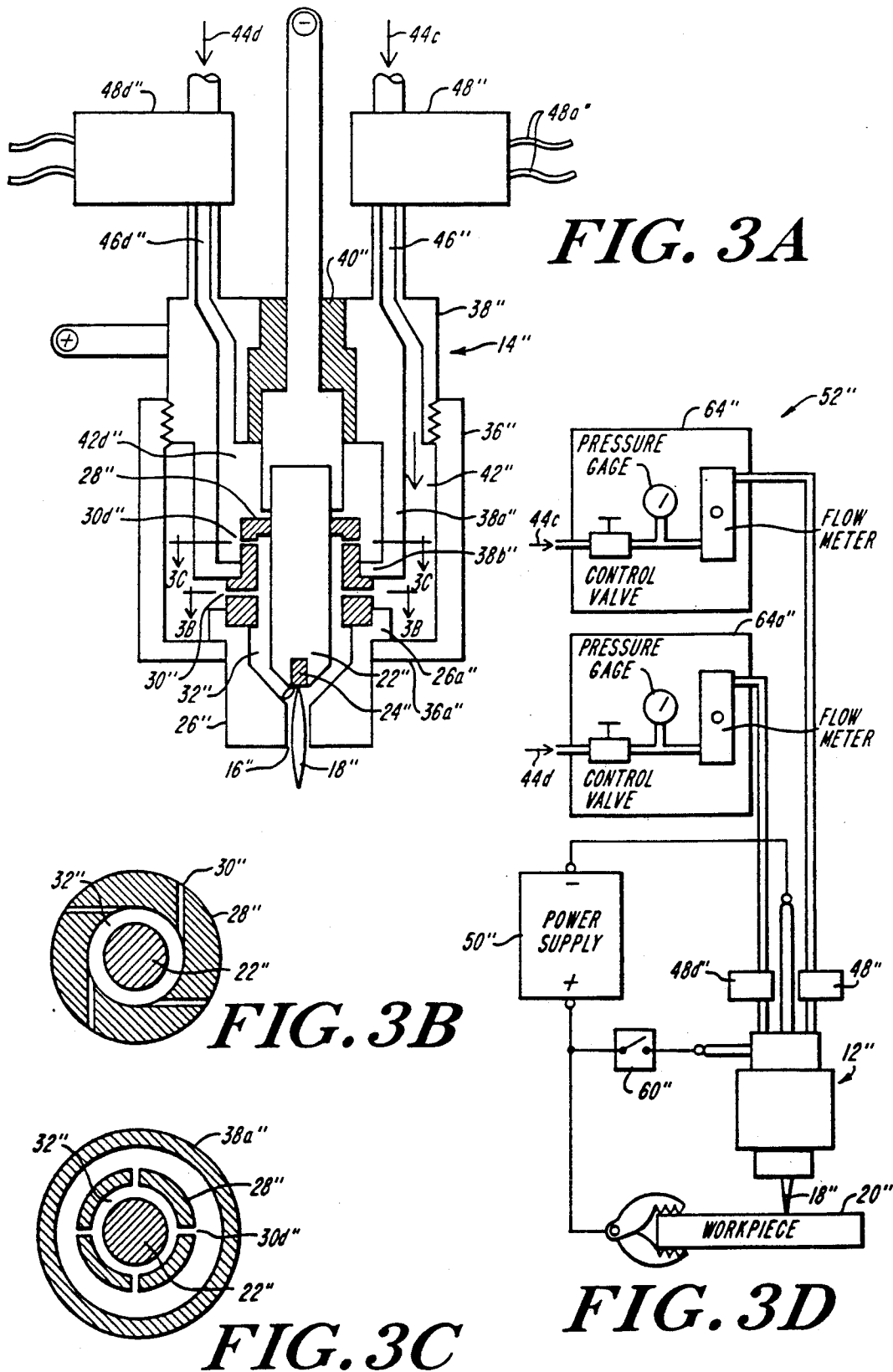


FIG. 2C



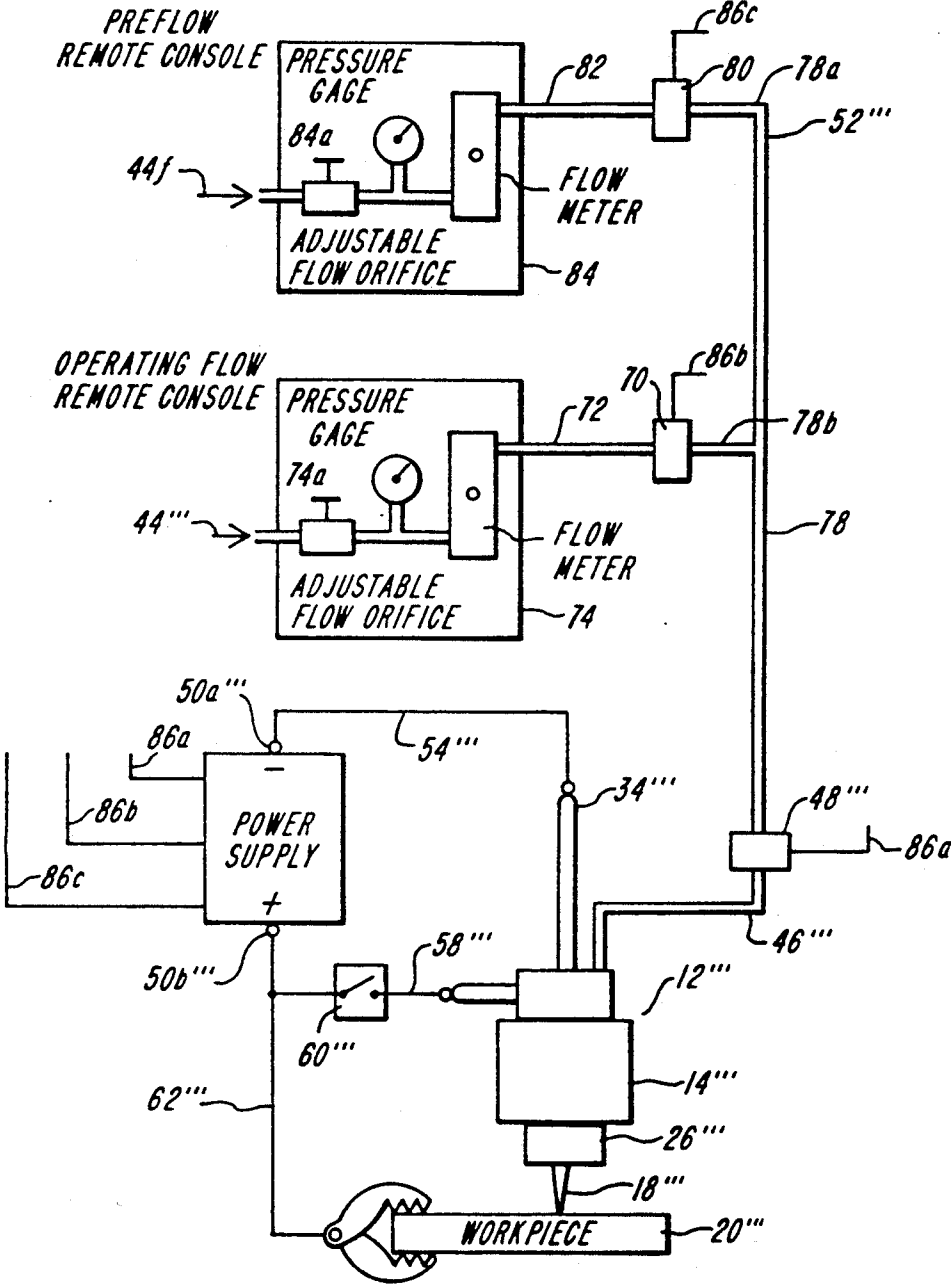


FIG. 4

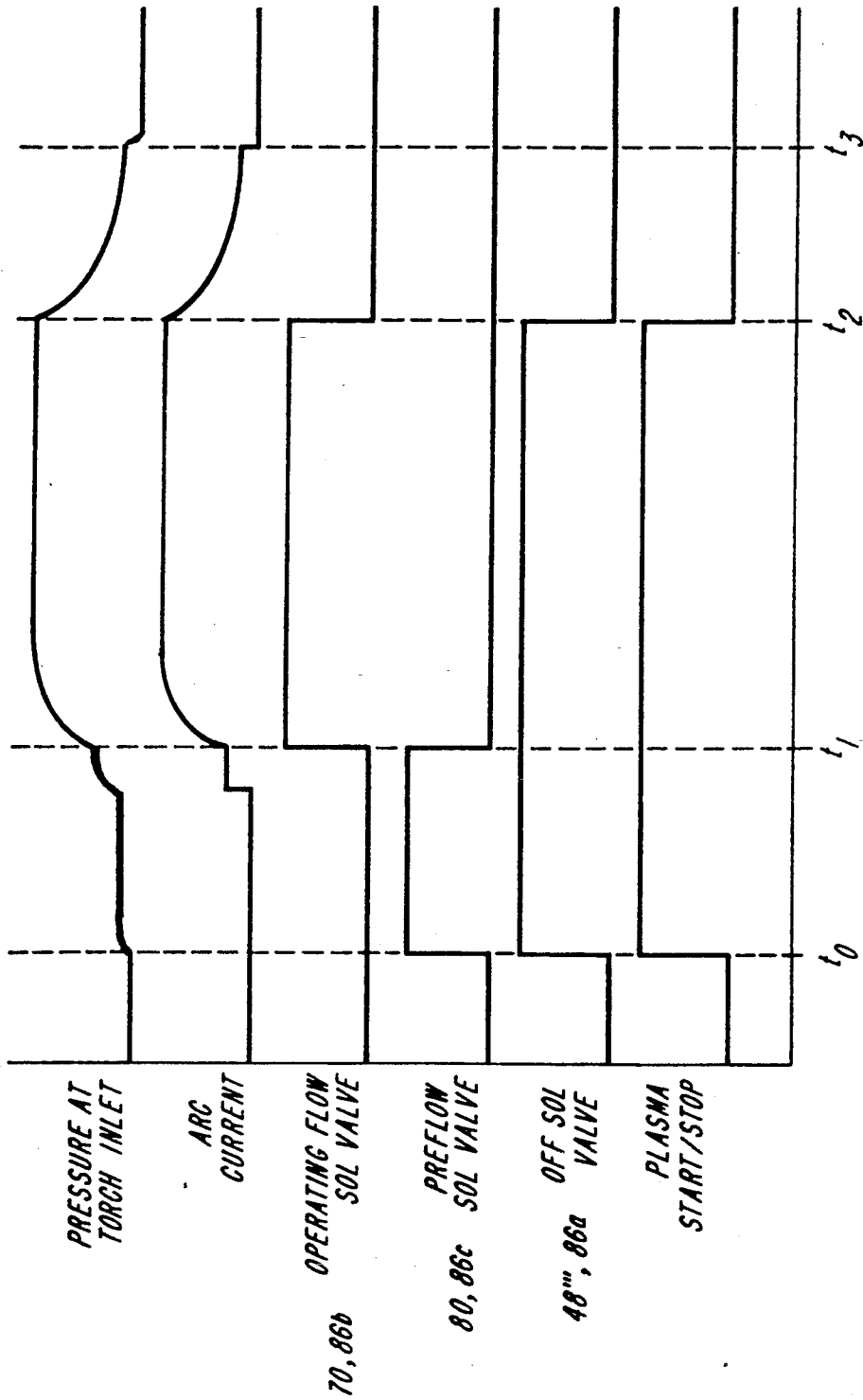


FIG. 5

PROCESS AND APPARATUS FOR REDUCING ELECTRODE WEAR IN A PLASMA ARC TORCH

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 07/513,780 filed on Apr. 24, 1990.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates in general to plasma arc cutting and welding processes and apparatus. More specifically, it relates to a process and apparatus for reducing electrode wear.

Plasma arc torches have a wide variety of applications such as the cutting of thick plates of steel and the cutting of comparatively thin sheets of galvanized metal commonly used in heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. The basic components of a plasma arc torch include a torch body, an electrode (cathode) mounted within the body, a nozzle (anode) with a central exit orifice, a flow of an ionizable gas, electrical connections, passages for cooling, and arc control fluids, and a power supply that produces a pilot arc in the gas, typically between the electrode and the nozzle, and then a plasma arc, a conductive flow of the ionized gas from the electrode to a workpiece. The gas can be non reactive, e.g. nitrogen, or reactive, e.g. oxygen or air.

Various plasma arc torches of this general type are described in U.S. Pat. Nos. 3,641,304 to Couch and Dean, 3,833,787 to Couch, 4,203,022 to Couch and Bailey, 4,421,970 to Couch, 4,791,268 to Sanders and Couch, 4,816,637 to Sanders and Couch, and 4,861,962 to Sanders and Couch, all commonly assigned with the present application. Plasma arc torches and related products are sold in a variety of models by Hypertherm, Inc. of Hanover, New Hampshire. The MAX 100 brand torch of Hypertherm is typical of the medium power torches (100 ampere output) using air as the working gas and useful for both plate fabrication and HVAC applications.

In all plasma arc torches, a common and heretofore unsolved problem has been a substantial wear of the electrode, particularly when the electrode is used with reactive gases such as oxygen or air. (Improved wear, other conditions being the same, is observed when using non reactive gases such as nitrogen or argon as the plasma gas, but the performance using pure oxygen is superior at least when used to cut certain materials such as mild steel. Similarly, air is superior to pure oxygen with respect to wear, but there is again a performance trade off.) As an example of this wear problem, the standard electrode for the MAX 100 brand torch of Hypertherm, Inc. shows wear as a generally concave pit on the lower end of the electrode, or more precisely, on an emitting element of hafnium mounted on the electrode. On average a wear depth of about 0.025 inch is observed in such a Hypertherm brand electrode after 120 cut cycles operating with oxygen or air. The wear results of commercially available units of others, as measured by Hypertherm, Inc., are typically worse. For the MAX 100 brand torch, when the wear produces a pit depth of 0.060 inch or more, Hypertherm, Inc. recommends that the electrode be replaced. In ordinary use, the electrode of a plasma arc cutting torch operating with reactive gases typically requires replacement after 0.5 to 2 hours of use depending strongly on the number of on off cycles. Wear considerations are signif-

icant not only because they necessitate the repeated replacement of a component, but also because they limit the maximum power that can be applied to a given torch.

In plasma arc cutting, it is also important to note that the quality of the cut is highly dependent on the flow pattern of the gas in a plasma chamber, defined at least in part as the region between the electrode and the nozzle. In particular, a swirling flow produced by injecting the gas tangentially into the plasma chamber has been found to be essential to produce a high quality cut. A swirling gas flow pattern is also important in stabilizing the plasma arc so that it exits the torch to attach to and cut the workpiece, but does not contact the torch nozzle itself. The nozzle is the principal component that is damaged by the arc when the arc is not well controlled.

Another design consideration is the very high temperatures of the plasma, e.g. greater than 10,000° C. These temperatures introduce corresponding changes in the gas properties such as its density and viscosity. These considerations are significant on start up and cut off. On start up the arc rapidly heats the gas which significantly decreases the gas density exiting the nozzle orifice. This presents the situation where the gas flow is choked in the nozzle orifice region. On cut off, the situation reverses and there is a tendency for the gas in the plasma chamber to blow out of the chamber very suddenly as the mass flow increases when the temperature drops.

It is common industry practice to use hafnium or zirconium as the cathodic emitter insert in the electrode. Hafnium, as of today, is the best choice for the cathodic emitting element when cutting with a reactive gas plasma. It exhibits the least wear of all other materials tried for this application, but is more costly than other materials. These electrodes nevertheless require frequent replacement. Lower wear has been associated with lower current levels, but at some point the reduction in performance associated with a reduced operating current becomes too great. Cooling the electrode has also been used to increase electrode life, whether by way of a gas flow or water flow placed in good thermal communication with the electrode. However, water cooling is expensive, cumbersome and is not desirable for low current units, e.g. those rated below 100 amperes. Air cooling is less efficient and limits the maximum operating current of the torch, even one carrying a comparatively low current. Therefore, to date, the only practical solution to the electrode wear problem has been to replace the entire electrode again and again, despite the clear economic disadvantages of this approach.

It is therefore a principal object of the present invention to reduce the wear on the electrode of a plasma arc torch significantly and thereby extend its life.

Another principal object of this invention is to reduce electrode wear and thereby allow operation at higher current levels than are presently feasible, even when operating with reactive gases.

Another object of the invention is to achieve a better cut quality than has heretofore been possible by allowing a greater level of swirl.

Another object of the invention is to provide the foregoing advantages while using standard electrode and nozzle constructions and without any significant

increase in the incidence of damage to torch parts such as nozzle gouging.

Yet another object of the invention is to provide the foregoing advantages for existing plasma arc torch systems using only comparatively simple and inexpensive modifications.

A still further object is to provide the foregoing advantages at a favorable cost of manufacture and operation.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A plasma arc cutting torch, particularly one using a reactive gas and employed in cutting metallic materials, has a torch body that mounts an electrode and a nozzle in a spaced relationship to define a plasma chamber therebetween. An ionizable gas is fed by tubes, passages and chambers to and through the torch body to a swirl ring mounted in the torch body. The swirl ring feeds the gas to the plasma chamber where it is ionized and exits the torch via a central exit orifice formed in the nozzle. The torch also includes standard electrical connections to a power supply and an electrical controller to initiate a pilot arc in the gas in the chamber and then transfer the arc to a workpiece for cutting or other operations.

A principal feature of the present invention is the process step of altering the mass flow rate of the gas and/or its flow pattern immediately before and immediately after the step of cutting off of the current to the torch. The mass flow rate is reduced by reducing the gas flow achieved by either closing off or reducing the gas flow to the plasma chamber. This mass flow rate reduction is timed to occur within a few hundred milliseconds before the current cut off, and preferably continue after cut off. The process step of cutting the arc current can be accomplished by a sudden step function of time or a gradual ramp function of time. The reduction in the gas flow may be coupled with a venting of the plasma chamber to atmosphere to facilitate a more rapid change in the gas flow pattern in the plasma chamber.

Alternatively, this invention includes altering the gas flow pattern from a standard swirling flow with a tangential component to one with a generally radial flow at its input to the plasma chamber, and then a generally axial flow through the chamber. This switch from a swirling flow to a radial/axial flow may be in conjunction with an overall reduction in the flow rate, and in conjunction with a decline in the current level and/or a venting of the plasma chamber to atmosphere. It has been found that by substitution to a more axial flow a higher overall mass flow rate can be tolerated at the time just preceeding current off than with a swirling flow.

When there is no venting, which is the preferred case, the gas pressure has been found to decay generally exponentially and the aforementioned reductions in mass flow preferably occur within about 500 milliseconds of start of the current cut off step. The preferred current off step is a controlled linear decreasing ramp which follows the decrease in mass flow. This ramp would continue to very low values of current, until the arc goes out. This preferred plasma off process provides the desired reduction in electrode wear while still providing sufficient gas flow to stabilize the plasma arc and avoid damage to the nozzle. With venting, the gas flow through the plasma chamber and thus the gas pressure in the plasma chamber decay much more rapidly. However the precise optimal timing will vary with the appli-

cation since it is a function of multiple variables, including gas type, current level, size of nozzle orifice, inlet flow area of swirl ring, gas pressure, gas flow rate, gas flow pattern (e.g. swirling or axial), and the physical distance between the plasma chamber and valving controlling flow conditions just prior to current cut off.

A principal feature of the present improved process for controlling electrode wear is the step of altering on start up (i) the type of and/or composition of gas, (ii) the mass flow rate of the gas and/or (iii) its flow pattern. More particularly, just prior to starting the plasma torch, a preflow is initiated at a low mass flow rate, where the flow is sufficient to initiate and sustain a pilot arc between the electrode and the nozzle, but not sufficiently high that the electrode exhibits the same wear characteristics that it would exhibit absent the start up features of this invention. A preflow of 60% of the full operating flow for a duration of 4 seconds is typical. The preflow gas can be pure oxygen or, preferably, some other gas such as air, argon or nitrogen. The flow pattern of the preflow can also be altered to be an axial flow or the flow pattern and mass flow rate can both be altered, in coordination with one another. For cutting mild steel the start-up process of the present invention also includes changing to pure oxygen and increasing the gas flow after the pilot arc transfers to the workpiece. If a gas such as air, argon or nitrogen is used for the preflow, this increase also includes switching over to a flow of pure oxygen as the plasma gas during normal cutting in the transferred arc mode. This increase is preferably a ramped up increase in the flow rate such that the gas flow and pressure reach their desired full operating values generally in coordination with the arc current increasing to its full operating value. These start up steps are most effective when used with the cut off steps of this invention summarized above.

Viewed as an apparatus, the invention for controlling wear on cut off includes as a flow altering means a valve in a line supplying gas to the plasma chamber that can be closed just prior to current cut off by a standard controller of a power supply. This flow rate reduction may be in coordination with a ramp-down of the arc current. The reason for the current ramp down is to reduce the possibility of damage to the nozzle orifice during the time of low mass flow just prior to current off. In an alternate form, the vent line from the plasma chamber to atmosphere is controlled (opened and closed) by a valve. The valve is opened by the controller in the critical period just prior to current cut off. In another form, the apparatus includes two swirl rings or two separate positions of the same ring, one which produces a conventional swirl flow and a second which produces principally an axial flow without swirl. These rings may be mounted in an axially stacked array. These swirl rings are connected to a gas supply by independent feed lines at least within the torch body, and a valve, or valves, switches the gas flow just prior to cut-off, in response to the controller, from the swirl inducing ring or ring portion to the radial/axial flow ring or ring portion. This switching may be in conjunction with venting and/or a flow rate reduction, and/or a current level reduction.

To alter the gas flow on start-up, the invention includes flow control apparatus that provide a preflow prior to application of a pilot arc current, and then ramps up the gas flow in response to the transfer of the arc to the workpiece. In a preferred form these flow control mechanisms include (1) a first and third valves

and an adjustable flow orifice all connected in series between a gas source and an infeed conduit to the torch and (2) a second valve and a second adjustable flow control orifice both connected in parallel with the first valve. Opening of the first and third valves with the second valve closed establishes the preflow. The level of the preflow is set by the first orifice. On transfer, the second valve in the parallel branch opens and the first valve closes. The flow is then limited by the second orifice and increases to a full operating value.

These and other features and objects of this invention will be more fully understood from the detailed description which should be read in light of the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1A is a simplified schematic view of a typical plasma arc torch constructed to operate according to the present invention;

FIG. 1B is a view in horizontal section along the line 1B—1B in FIG. 1A;

FIG. 1C is a simplified schematic view of a plasma arc cutting system according to the present invention using the torch shown in FIGS. 1A and 1B;

FIG. 1D is a six graph timing diagram of the gas flow alteration of the present invention in relation to the cut-off arc current;

FIGS. 2A, 2B and 2C correspond to FIGS. 1A, 1B and 1C and show an alternative embodiment of the invention utilizing a valved vent in combination with a valved gas feed;

FIGS. 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D correspond to FIGS. 2A—2C, FIGS. 3B and 3C corresponding to FIG. 2B, and show an alternative embodiment of the invention utilizing axial and radial inlet hole sets in a swirl ring to establish either swirled or axial gas flow patterns in the plasma chamber;

FIG. 4 is a simplified schematic view corresponding to FIG. 1C showing flow control mechanisms in the gas supply line to provide a preflow and ramp up of the flow on start up as well as a ramp down on cut off; and

FIG. 5 is a five graph timing diagram of the gas flow alteration of the present improved invention on start up.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

FIGS. 1A and 1B show in simplified schematic form a typical plasma arc cutting torch 12 such as any of a variety of models of torches sold by Hypertherm, Inc. The present description is therefore intended to illustrate the basic principles and elements common to plasma arc cutting torches of this type, but not to describe construction details of any particular torch model. The torch has a body indicated generally at 14 which typically is cylindrical with an exit orifice 16 at one end, the lower end 12a as shown, through which a plasma arc 18, an ionized gas jet, passes and attaches to a metal workpiece 20 which is being cut. The gas can be non reactive, such as nitrogen or a noble gas, but it can also be reactive, such as oxygen or air. A significant advantage of the present invention is that the torch can operate with a reactive gas and nevertheless have dramatic improvement in electrode wear as compared to the best results obtainable with any plasma arc cutting torch, regardless of the current level, or the effectiveness of the torch cooling arrangements.

The torch body 14 supports a cathode 22, commonly referred to as an electrode, which is typically made of

copper and has a generally cylindrical configuration. An emitting element 24 is press fitted into the lower end face of the electrode 22. The electrode and the emitting element are centered within the torch body and aligned with the exit orifice 16. When using a reactive gas, the insert is typically formed of hafnium or zirconium. The body 14 also mounts a nozzle 26 with a central nozzle orifice that defines the torch exit orifice 16. The nozzle is spaced from the electrode. A swirl ring 28 having a set of radially offset gas distribution holes 30 is replaceably mounted in the torch body. It is positioned to feed a flow of the plasma gas from the holes 30 to a plasma arc chamber 32 defined, as shown, by the electrode, the nozzle and the swirl ring. The offset of the holes, best seen in FIG. 1B, introduce a tangential velocity component to the gas flow through the chamber 32 causing it to swirl. An advantage of this invention is that the level of swirl introduced by these holes can be greater than has heretofore practicable resulting in a better cut quality than has heretofore been attainable. The swirl ring is shown in a tight fitting, gas sealed relationship to the electrode. It will be understood, however, that the swirl ring is typically mounted in a support member and does not itself seal to the electrode. More generally, the particular construction details of the torch body and arrangements for mounting these elements directing gas and cooling fluid flows and providing electrical connections can and do take a wide variety of forms.

A negative power lead 34 surrounds the upper end of the electrode 22 to make a good electrical connection. A retaining cap 36 threads onto a current ring 38 that forms the upper end of the torch body 14. An insulator sleeve 40 separates and electrically isolates the current ring 38 from the negative power lead 34. The retaining cap has a lower lip 36a which engages a flange 26a on the nozzle in an abutting relationship. The retaining cap when tightened onto the ring 38 captures and replaceably secures the nozzle against the swirl ring. In an alternative construction not shown, it can also capture and secure the swirl ring between the nozzle and another internal support structure within the torch body. In the configuration shown, the retaining cap 36 also, in part, defines a gas plenum chamber 42 that acts as a local supply to the swirl ring 28 and the plasma chamber 32. A flow 44 of plasma gas passes through an inlet tube 46 which penetrates the current ring 38 to feed the gas to the plenum chamber 42. A solenoid valve 48 such as Model No. AFP33183 manufactured by Automatic Switch Company is secured in the inlet tube, preferably at a point closely spaced from the torch body. Control signals to the valve over lines 48a, 48a open and close the valve to regulate the flow rate of the gas to the torch. In a pilot arc mode of operation, where a pilot arc is drawn between the electrode and the nozzle through the gas in the plasma chamber, the nozzle acts as an anode and the cap 36 and current ring 38 form a pilot arc current return circuit.

In operation, plasma gas 44 flows through the solenoid valve 48 and the inlet tube 46 into the plenum chamber 42. From there, it flows through the gas distribution holes 30 in the swirl ring 28 into the plasma arc chamber 32 and finally out of the torch through the nozzle orifice 16. When the torch is operating in the nontransferred pilot arc mode, a power supply 50 provides current to the torch at an appropriate voltage to initiate the pilot arc and then maintain it. The power supply can be any conventional regulated D.C. supply and includes a p.c. board or the like which controls the

operation of the power supply and other components of the torch system such as flow control valves.

With reference to the complete plasma arc cutting torch system 52 depicted in FIG. 1c, the complete current path in the nontransferred pilot arc mode is from the negative power supply terminal 50a, through lead 54, the negative power lead 34, electrode 22, a pilot arc plasma 56 (FIG. 1A), the nozzle 26, the retaining cap 36, the current ring 38, a pilot arc return lead 58, a closed pilot arc switch 60, and a power supply positive terminal 50b. When the torch 12 is lowered toward the workpiece 20, the arc transfers to the workpiece as the ionized plasma jet 18. This allows some current to flow from the workpiece through a ground lead 62 back to the power supply positive terminal 50b. When this transferred current path is established, the pilot arc switch opens and the torch is cutting the workpiece. In this transferred or cutting mode, the current path is from the power supply negative terminal 50a, the lead 54, negative power lead 34, electrode 22, the plasma arc or jet 18, the workpiece 20, the ground lead 62 and the power supply positive terminal 50b.

An operator sets a desired gas flow or pressure associated with full power operation in a transferred arc mode prior to initiating the pilot arc at a control console 64 which is removed from the torch itself. The console includes gas flow regulators, gas valving, and pressure gauges. The flow and pressure values set by the operator at the console correspond in a known way to the actual gas flow and pressure in the plasma chamber 32 prior to the pilot arc. Starting the pilot arc heats the gas causing an increase in the gas temperature within the chamber and a decrease in the flow, in a manner well known in the art. A typical gas pressure in the chamber 32 during the pilot arc is 20 to 40 psi. The pilot arc is started by a high frequency spark or other means, such as a contact starting technique, all of which are well known in the art. During start up the plasma gas 44 flows through the tube 46, solenoid valve 48, plenum chamber 42, swirl holes 30, the plasma chamber 32 and out the exit orifice 16. As noted above, the swirling flow established by the holes 30 is very important in obtaining a good quality cut and in stabilizing the arc within the nozzle exit orifice 16—to prevent the arc from impinging on the nozzle and gouging it. (As will be discussed in detail below, the operational life of the electrode can be increased further by utilizing a novel start up procedure and the apparatus illustrated in FIGS. 4 and 5.)

Also as noted above, the torch begins cutting when it is brought close to the workpiece so that the arc transfers to the workpiece and the controller opens switch 60. After transfer, in normal operation the controller increases the current level to a predetermined value for cutting. This increase in current also results in an increase in the heating of the plasma gas, a further increase in the gas pressure in the plasma chamber, and a further decrease in the gas flow out of the nozzle exit orifice. The maximum recommended current levels vary greatly among different torches and applications, with currents in the range of about 20 to 200 amperes D.C. being characterized as low currents and those 200 and above being high currents. A typical current level for a water cooled cutting torch used to cut plate steel is 260 amperes.

A principal discovery of the present invention is that a significant loss of material (wear) of the electrode during its operation occurs not during the actual cut-

ting, but rather when the current to the arc is shut off. While the mechanisms for this wear are not fully understood, there is evidence that the electrode becomes molten, at least in part, during operation and that on cut off of the electrical power wear is related to a complicated interaction between the molten surface(s) of the electrode and the flow and pressure of the plasma gas through the plasma chamber.

A principal feature of the present invention is a control of the plasma gas flow to the plasma chamber in conjunction with a controlled electrical shut off to reduce electrode wear substantially. In its simplest form, the invention involves a total shut off of the plasma gas flow to the chamber 30 just before (1) a total, step function shut off of the arc current or (2) at the same time the arc current starts a gradual shut off, but also just before a total shut off of the arc current. This effect is achieved by closing the solenoid valve 48 just prior to the total shutting off process of the arc current. The preferred process for shutting off the current is a controlled linear decreasing ramp which follows the decreasing mass flow. The timing of these shut offs is, however, critical. If the gas flow is allowed to decrease rapidly, there is a significant diminution of the swirling plasma flow that stabilizes the arc. Therefore the arc can and will attack and damage, or even destroy, the nozzle in a very short time. On the other hand, if the shut offs are too close in time, the gas flow and pressure in the chamber 30, which decay in a generally exponential manner with the valve 48 shut, exhibit little change and wear occurs to about the same extent as if the valve 48 was left open. The gas flow shut off continues through the arc current shut off, and thereafter.

The timing of the gas and current shut off processes in accordance with the present invention are illustrated by the timing diagrams of FIG. 1D. The three lefthand graphs show the control signals (whether a voltage signal, current signal, or otherwise) as a function of time. The first lefthand graph shows a control signal (applied over lines 48a, 48b) to the solenoid valve 48 changing its state at a time t_1 (the signal goes from a "1" state to a "0" state which are indicative of either a digital switching or an analog change sufficient to produce the desired change in state of the valve 48). This change in the control signal closes the valve at t_1 . The second lefthand graph shows a control signal for the arc current, a signal generated by the controller of the power supply 50. In accordance with this invention, the arc current control signal changes its state, again shown as a change from a "1" state to a "0" state, at a time t_2 which is after time t_1 . The gas flow is therefore cut off before the arc current by a time interval Δt equal to the difference between t_2 and t_1 . The third lefthand graph shows an alternative control sequence for the arc current cut-off process. In accordance with this invention the arc current control signal changes its state, again shown as a change from a "1" state to a "0" state, at a time t_1 which is the same time as the valve control signal. This change commences the operation of the controller to produce a ramp down of the arc current as shown in the lowermost righthand graph of FIG. 1D.

The righthand graphs in FIG. 1D show: (1) the gas flow rate through the plasma chamber 32; (2) the arc current shut off process as a sudden step off at t_2 ; and (3) an alternative arc current shut off process as a gradual linear ramp down from full current at t_1 to a minimum sustainable current at t_2 when the arc current snuffs out to zero. These graphs are also presented as a function of

time and for the same periods of time as the corresponding lefthand graphs. After closing the valve 48 at t_1 , the gas flow falls steadily. A generally linear fall off in flow is shown, but the relationship is actually more complex and the curve is in fact generally exponential. The important factor is that the gas flow value falls substantially over the interval Δt so that a) it is at a comparatively low value at t_2 when the arc current is shut off, as illustrated by the second righthand graph of FIG. 1D, or b) it is a comparatively low value at t_2 following the current ramping down illustrated by the third righthand graph of FIG. 1D. The presently preferred embodiment of this invention uses non-vented ramp down of the gas flow as shown in the upper righthand graph in combination with an arc current ramp down as shown in the lower righthand graph that follows the change of the gas flow over the time interval Δt . This preferred mode of operation seems to produce the least wear despite the fact that a lower arc current changes the gas density in a manner that produces an increased gas flow rate through the plasma chamber—other factors being constant.

While the precise value of Δt varies with each torch and the particular operating parameters, for most low current plasma arc cutting applications a Δt of 500 milliseconds or less has been found to be the right timing to reduce electrode wear. For the MAX 200 brand torch, a Δt of roughly 250 to 300 milliseconds without venting and with a following current ramp down has been found to be optimal. In the operation of a MAX 100 brand torch after 120 cut cycles using this invention there is a pit depth (wear) of about 0.005 inch, whereas normal operation without using this invention produces a wear depth of about 0.025 inch in the same electrode insert 24. This wear reduction translates into an electrode life which is five times the best value that has ever before been attainable. This invention may also allow, on average, torches to be operated at powers in excess of their conventional ratings.

Note that at t_2 there is still a residual as flow even though the gas feed is cut off at t_1 . This ensures that until and at current cut off there is a sufficient flow in the chamber to stabilize the arc and prevent nozzle damage. Also, there is a brief surge in the flow after cut off of the current. This is believed to reflect a sudden cooling of the gas in the absence of the arc and a rapid out flow of gas from the torch driven by the gas pressure in the plasma chamber and the sudden change in the properties of the gas after the arc is extinguished. This phenomena suggests that while the gas flow to the torch can be reduced over the interval Δt by reducing the flow 44 to the plasma torch, that a complete closure of the valve 4 is preferred since this closure upstream of the plasma chamber dampens the strength of the flow surge and limits the total volume of the flow when the current is cut off. As already stated, it is also within the scope of the present invention to reduce the current at t_1 , e.g. by ramping it down over the interval Δt rather than having an abrupt shut off at t_2 . It is also under the scope of this invention to allow a reduction in the overall current prior to t_1 , or after t_1 , i.e., prior to or after closing the solenoid valve.

FIGS. 2A-2C show the plasma arc cutting torch 12' incorporating an alternative embodiment of the invention, like parts in the FIG. 2A-2C embodiment having the same reference numbers as in FIGS. 1A-1C, but with a prime. The structure and mode of operation of the torch 12' and torch system 52' is the same as de-

scribed above with respect to the FIGS. 1A-1C embodiment, except for the addition of a vent tube 66 and an associated solenoid valve 68 connected in the vent tube to open and close it. The tube 66 penetrates the current ring 38' and is in fluid communication with the plenum chamber 42'. A control signal from the controller carried over lines 68a, 68a operates the valve 68. In this embodiment, when the solenoid valve 48 is closed at time t_1 . The vent valve 68 is opened. Because the vent tube 68 is open at its end 66a at atmosphere, or to some other lower pressure region such as a vacuum chamber, opening the valve 68 causes the gas flow and pressure in the plenum and the plasma chamber to decay more rapidly than the decay of the FIGS. 1A-1C embodiment. This allows the current to be shut off more quickly after the gas flow is cut off at time t_1 . It has been discovered, however, that timing is very important in this configuration. Since by venting an alternative flow path is established, the flow through the nozzle can go to low values and cause the plasma to become unstable very quickly. In general, when venting is used the flow alteration precedes the arc current shut off by a significantly short period of time and without venting. With this venting, the interval Δt can be reduced from about 250 milliseconds to less than 5 milliseconds when operating a MAX 200 brand torch with air. This may reduce the likelihood of nozzle damage caused by a destabilized arc. It is also contemplated that valves 48' and 68 can be combined in a single venting-type valve.

FIGS. 3A-3D show another embodiment of a torch 12'' and torch system 52'' utilizing according to the present invention, like parts being identified with the same reference numbers, but double primed. This embodiment utilizes the discovery that electrode wear can be reduced substantially if the gas flow through the plasma chamber is changed not only in flow rate, but also in flow pattern, just prior to current shut off. More specifically, electrode wear is reduced to almost negligible levels on current shut off if the degree of swirling of the gas is reduced just before cut off. At moderate gas pressures, this result holds for even high gas flow rates (e.g. 120 scfh). In operation with the Hypertherm® MAX 100 brand torch, negligible wear was observed when the gas flow into the plasma chamber was radial (no swirl) and the gas pressure in the chamber was below 30 psi. While a perfectly radial flow and moderate to low gas pressures produce the best results, the invention also provides reduced electrode wear with less than a perfectly radial flow and at increased gas pressures. In this embodiment a major concern once again is destabilization of the plasma arc in the absence of a swirling flow. The solution of the present invention is to use a swirling flow, and then suddenly switch to a radial flow, with substantially no interruption of the overall flow rate, immediately before current cut off. The torch 12'' and system 52'' accomplish this mode of operation.

The torch 12'' has generally the same construction as the torches 12 and 12', except that the torch is serviced by two separate gas feed lines, each with its own solenoid valve, which feed separate plenum chambers and in turn feed separate, independent inlet holes in the swirl ring 28'' or an equivalent structure. In the preferred form shown, there is a first gas flow 44c which passes through the inlet tube 46'', the valve 48'', an annular plenum chamber 42'', the inlet holes 30'', the plasma chamber 32'' and out the exit nozzle orifice 16''. This gas flow path provides a swirling gas flow for

cutting that produces a good quality cut and stabilizes the arc. The swirl is established by the holes 30'' which are radially offset as is best seen in FIG. 3B. The plenum chamber 42'' is defined by the same components as in previous embodiment except that the current ring has an annular downwardly extending wall 38a and a flange 38b at the lower edge that abuts a step recess in the swirl ring 28'' in a gas tight seal. (It will be understood that the seal can be secured with O-rings, a labyrinth seal, or any conventional gas seal that also allows the swirl ring to be disassembled from the torch as necessary.) The wall 38a and flange 38b separate and isolate from one another the outer plenum chamber 42'' and an inner plenum chamber 42d''.

A gas flow 44d passes through an inlet tube 46d'', a valve 48d'', the plenum chamber 42d'', inlet holes 30d'', the plasma arc chamber 32'' and out the exit nozzle orifice 16''. This second gas flow path for the flow 44d uses inlet holes 30d'' in the swirl ring that are generally radially directed as is best seen in FIG. 3C. The gas flow through the plasma chamber is therefore generally axial (downwardly as shown) through the chamber 32'' to the exit 16''; there is substantially no swirl.

In accordance with this process embodiment of the present invention, at a predetermined but very brief interval Δt before the current to the torch is cut off, the controller closes the valve 48'' for the flow 44c and opens the valve 48d'' for the flow 44d. The interval Δt for a MAX 100 brand torch operating with a reacting gas is typically less than 500 milliseconds. This change in flow pattern, with no other changes in flow or current parameters, has also been found to provide dramatic reductions in electrode wear. However, this embodiment can be combined with the mass flow rate reduction embodiment described above with respect to FIGS. 1A-1D and 2A-2C. For example, the current level can be ramped down after t_1 .

FIG. 3D shows a suitable system 52'' for practicing the invention in this altered flow pattern mode. A control console 64'' remote from the torch and therefore the substantial electromagnetic interference produced by the torch, controls the gas flow 44c. A like console 64a'' controls the flow 44d. In practice the consoles 64'' and 64a'' can be a single unit.

While various time periods have been suggested above for Δt , the optimal interval will depend on the specific torch, its applications, and related parameters. In general, Δt is a function of the type of gas, the current level, size of nozzle orifice, inlet flow area of swirl ring, the gas pressure, the gas flow rate, the gas flow pattern, and the physical separation between the solenoid valves in the inlet and vent tubes and the plasma. The separation is preferably less than 12 inches for the MAX 100 brand torch. This separation avoids delays and unintended variations in flow parameters due to the presence of a large fluid mass upstream of a plasma chamber and downstream of the valve. The values for an acceptable interval Δt can readily be determined empirically. Also, while the invention as described thus far has focused on the alteration of the gas flow just prior to cut off, it should be understood that the altered condition continues through electrical cut off and for a brief period thereafter. However, the flow usually ceases entirely very shortly after cut off, whether due to a closing of the solenoid valve in the inlet tube which eventually brings the flow through the plasma chamber to zero, or through a closing of the valve 48d'' in the

"radial" gas flow path to the radial hole 30d'' in the FIG. 3A-3D embodiment.

FIG. 4 shows yet another embodiment of a torch 12''' and a torch system 52''' according to the present invention, like parts being identified with the same reference number, but triple primed. This embodiment is like the embodiment shown in FIGS. 1A-1D except that it has two sources of plasma gas connected via tube 78 and on-off solenoid valve 48''' to the inlet tube 46''' which in turn directs the gas to the interior of the torch 12''' and its plasma chamber. A preflow gas flow 44f flows through the preflow remote console 84 including an orifice 84a, a pressure gauge and a flow meter. The preflow passes through conduit 82 and a preflow on off solenoid valve 80 into a branch conduit 78a and then into a gas feed tube 78. An operating plasma gas flow 44''' flows through the operating flow remote console 74 including an orifice 74a, a pressure gauge, and a flow meter. The operating gas flow 44''' then passes through a conduit 72 and an on off solenoid valve 70 into a branch conduit 78b, and then into the gas feed tube 78. The two sources of plasma gas are connected in parallel via branch conduit 78a and branch conduit 78b to the feed tube 78.

A principal discovery of the present improvement invention is that significant electrode wear can occur on start up as well as cut off. In particular it has been found that alteration of the gas flow to the torch on start up can make substantial improvements in the electrode life even as compared to the substantial improvements achieved with the cut off controls described above with respect to FIGS. 1A-3D. Specifically, the start up procedure and apparatus described below in detail have been found to double the life of electrodes when also using the cut off invention of FIGS. 1A-3D. An electrode life about 10 times than that obtainable using prior art procedures and equipment is readily obtainable.

The solenoid valves operate automatically in response to control signals produced by the power supply and directed to the valves over lines 86a, 86b and 86c. The valves 48''', 70 and 80 can also be solenoid feed valves of the type described above with respect to valve 48. The flow orifices 84a and 74a can be adjusted manually or automatically.

In operation, to start the torch 12''' according to the present invention, a preflow 44f of the ionizable gas is directed from the source to the torch. The preflow is at a significantly lower flow rate and pressure than the gas flow rate and pressure associated with full power operation when the arc has transferred to a workpiece.

With reference to FIG. 5, the start of the plasma torch is indicated at t_0 . A control signal initiated by the operator causes signals to be sent over line 86a and 86c to open valves 48''' and 80 respectively, but maintain valve 70 in a closed condition. All of the gas flow to the torch therefore passes through, and is limited by, the adjustable orifice 84a. It is set to establish a gas mass flow rate that is (i) sufficient to initiate and sustain a pilot arc in the torch 12''', but also (ii) sufficiently below the full operating value in the transferred arc mode that the improved wear characteristics of the present invention are observed. By way of illustration, a full flow rate can be 40 scfh for a Hypertherm® MAX 100 brand torch and the preflow can be 24 scfh, or about 60% of the full flow. The precise value for the preflow will vary depending on the factors such as those enumerated above with respect to the timing of the altering of the gas flow on cut off, but it will be within the functional

"end limits" given above, that is, being able to ignite a pilot arc while exhibiting the wear improvement of this invention. The middle graphs in FIG. 5 reflect valves 48''' and 80 opening at t_0 . The top graph reflects an increase in the gas pressure in the plasma chamber as a result of the preflow through these valves.

Time t_1 in FIG. 5 reflects the time when the arc transfers to the workpiece and the torch begins operating in the transferred arc mode. The time interval t_0 to t_1 is preferably sufficient to produce a stable preflow. Four seconds is a typical value for this interval. Just prior to t_1 there is a small step increase in the arc current, as illustrated in the second graph from the top in FIG. 5. This current is a standard pilot arc current. The pilot arc is ignited after the preflow is stabilized and is maintained for a brief interval before t_1 , a typical value being 20 milliseconds.

At t_1 , the transfer of the arc generates another control signal sent over line 86b to open valve 70 as reflected in the third graph from the bottom in FIG. 5. The power supply also begins to increase the arc current at t_1 toward a desired full operating value. At the same time the control signal 86c causes the preflow solenoid valve 80 to close. The opening of valve 70 allows an increased gas flow to the torch as reflected by the rise in the gas pressure at the inlet to the torch as shown in the top graph in FIG. 5. The orifice 74a sets the maximum flow to the torch. Due to the lead from the valves to the plasma chamber, the increase in the gas flow and pressure is not a sharp step function, but rather a smooth ramping up, as shown. The increase in the gas flow is preferably in coordination with the increase in the arc current, also as shown. The current and gas flow need not increase precisely in coordination, but the flow must be increased sufficiently to as to sustain the transferred arc at the current level then prevailing. The flow must also swirl and have a sufficient flow rate to guide the plasma jet and contain it against attacking the torch itself. This valve and conduit arrangement also lends itself to the use one type of gas as a preflow gas and another type as the plasma gas in a transferred arc mode. Preferably a less reactive gas such as nitrogen or argon is used for the preflow. The switch over from a preflow to an operating flow attendant opening valve 70 and closing valve 80 on arc transfer allows the introduction of a more reactive type of gas such as pure oxygen or air. Alternatively, the preflow can be air and the operating flow can be oxygen. When this preflow and ramp up start procedure is used in combination with the cut off procedures of the present invention, the electrode life can readily and reliably be extended by a factor of about ten.

While the start up features of this invention have been described with respect to a change in the flow rate produced by a valve network, the beneficial effects of an axial gas flow evident on cut off also apply to start up. A swirling flow is necessary to control the arc during operation, but at least during the preflow phase when the pilot arc is ignited, the flow pattern can be axial to reduce wear, and then switched over to a swirling flow on transfer at t_1 . This change in flow pattern can be combined with an increase in flow rate before, at, or after the switch over at t_1 . The apparatus shown in FIGS. 3A-3D can be used for this flow pattern alteration on start up as well as on cut off.

To end a cycle of operation with the FIG. 4 embodiment and to utilize the cut off advantages of the present invention, the valves 48''' and 70 can be close at t_2 caus-

ing a decay in the gas pressure and flow. There is a corresponding decrease in the arc current, all as described above with respect to FIGS. 1A-3D. At time t_3 the cycle of operation is complete and the torch is off.

There has been described a process and apparatus for reducing the wear on an electrode of a plasma arc torch, particularly a cutting torch, but in general for all types of plasma torches, e.g. ones for welding, spraying or other applications. The invention, in any of its embodiments, can reduce the wear that presently occurs on all electrodes to an extent that the life of the electrode is at least doubled and can be as much as ten times or more. The invention allows a given torch to be operated at increased power levels and with reactive gases. These advantages can be achieved with no diminution of cut quality, and using standard electrodes and nozzles. In fact, due to the discovery that the swirling flow does not adversely affect the electrode wear during cutting, and knowing that a strong swirl yields high quality cuts, the swirl strength can now be increased in torches to improve cut quality. Moreover, existing plasma arc torches and complete torch systems can be readily modified to use the present invention.

While the invention has been described with respect to its preferred embodiments, it will be understood that various modifications and alterations will occur to those skilled in the art from the foregoing detailed description and the accompanying drawings. For example, the torch can have cooling passages not shown, be water cooled, or be adapted for welding or spray application of metal films. The electrode and nozzle can assume a variety of configurations and constructions. The swirl ring 28'' can be formed as two separate, axially stacked or axially spaced rings rather than as a single piece component as shown. These and other modifications and alterations are intended to fall within the scope of the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A process for reducing the wear of an electrode of a plasma arc torch having a torch body that mounts a nozzle at one end of the torch adjacent a workpiece, the nozzle being in a spaced relationship with respect to the electrode to form a plasma chamber therebetween, means for directing a flow of an ionizable gas to the plasma chamber, and means for conducting an electrical current through the electrode to ionize the gas to form the plasma, said current being variable and including a pilot arc level sufficient to initiate and sustain a pilot arc and a transferred arc level sufficient to sustain the plasma arc when it transfers to the workpiece, comprising,

initiating a preflow of said ionizable gas at a flow rate substantially less than the rate necessary to sustain the transferred plasma arc during said cutting, initiating said electrical current at the pilot arc level to initiate a pilot arc in said preflow, and altering the flow of the ionizable gas through said chamber in coordination with the transfer of said plasma arc to the workpiece and continuing thereafter for a time interval as the flow ramps up smoothly from said preflow rate to said operating flow rate.

2. The electrode wear reduction process of claim 1 wherein said flow altering comprises a step selected from the group of steps consisting of (i) increasing the mass flow rate of the gas by said smooth ramping up, (ii) increasing the swirl of the gas in the chamber, (iii) changing the type of the ionizable gas in combination

with at least one of steps (i) and (ii), and (iv) any combination of steps (i), (ii) and (iii).

3. The process of claims 1 or 2 wherein said altering occurs a sufficiently long time after said initiating of the current to reduce electrode wear but a sufficiently short time after the arc transfer to the workpiece to sustain the arc in the transferred mode.

4. The process of claim 3 wherein said altering raises the pressure of said gas in the plasma chamber generally exponentially and wherein said altering is initiated within about 500 milliseconds after initiating an increase of the current from the pilot arc level to a transferred arc level.

5. The process of claim 2 comprising the further step of increasing said arc current to follow said increase in the mass flow rate of the gas to the plasma chamber, said increasing of said arc current in turn increasing the gas pressure in the plasma chamber which restricts the gas flow from the torch.

6. The process of claim 2 comprising the further step of increasing the arc current along with an increase in the swirl of the gas flow in the plasma chamber which increases the gas pressure in the plasma chamber which restricts the gas flow from the torch.

7. The process of claims 5 or 6 wherein said increasing of the arc current commences after said flow altering.

8. The process of claim 2 wherein said increase of the swirling includes switching from a flow into the plasma chamber that is radial to a flow into the chamber that is generally radially offset to produce a swirling flow of the gas through the plasma chamber in the transferred arc mode.

9. The process of claim 8 wherein said altering is a combination of said switching from a generally radial flow and a generally concurrent increase of said mass flow rate.

10. A process for reducing the wear of an electrode of a plasma arc torch having a torch body that mounts a nozzle at one end of the torch adjacent a workpiece in a spaced relationship with respect to the electrode to form a plasma chamber therebetween, means for directing a flow of an ionizable gas to the plasma chamber, and means for conducting an electrical current through the electrode to ionize the gas to form the plasma, first in a pilot arc mode and then in a transferred arc mode, comprising,

initiating a preflow of said gas through said chamber at a flow rate sufficient to support a pilot arc between said electrode and said nozzle, said preflow being substantially less than the flow rate during operation in a transferred arc mode,

initiating a pilot arc in said preflow,

a first altering of said gas flow shortly after the initiation of said pilot arc,

increasing the arc current in coordination with said altering to a level to sustain the plasma arc in the transferred mode,

cutting off said electrical current, and

a second altering of the flow of the ionizable gas through said chamber immediately before and continuing after said cutting off,

said second altering occurring a sufficiently long time before said cutting off to reduce electrode wear, but a sufficiently short time before cutting off that the arc does not damage the nozzle.

11. The electrode wear reduction process of claim 10 wherein said second flow altering comprises a step

selected from the group of steps consisting of (i) reducing the mass flow rate of the gas, (ii) reducing the swirl of the gas in the chamber, and (iii) any combination of steps (i) and (ii).

12. The process of claims 10 or 11 further comprising the steps of reducing electrical current just prior to said cutting off.

13. The process of claim 11 further comprising the step of venting said plasma chamber in conjunction with said second flow altering to alter the flow of the gas in the plasma chamber rapidly.

14. The process of claim 13 wherein said second altering reduces the pressure of said gas in the plasma chamber generally exponentially and wherein said altering is initiated within about 500 milliseconds before said cutting off.

15. The process of claim 11 wherein said reducing the mass flow rate comprises closing the flow of gas through the torch body to the plasma chamber.

16. The process of claim 11 wherein said reducing of the current is gradual over the period commencing with said second flow altering and ending with said cutting off.

17. The process of claim 16 wherein said current reduction is ramped down to follow said reduction in the flow rate of the gas to the plasma chamber.

18. The process of claim 17 wherein said current reduction is ramped down along with said reduction in the swirl of the gas flow in the plasma chamber.

19. The process of claim 11 wherein said reducing of the current commences prior to said second flow altering.

20. The process of claim 11 wherein said reduction of the swirling includes switching from a flow into the plasma chamber that is radially offset to a flow into the chamber that is generally radial to produce a substantially axial flow of the gas through the plasma chamber.

21. The process of claim 20 wherein said altering is a combination of said switching to a generally radial flow and a generally concurrent reduction of said mass flow rate.

22. The process of claim 20 or 21 further comprising the step of venting the plasma chamber in conjunction with said switching to a generally radial flow.

23. In a plasma arc torch system including a plasma arc torch having an electrode mounted in a body of the torch in a spaced relationship with respect to a nozzle having an exit port and mounted on the torch body at one end of the torch adjacent a workpiece to define a plasma chamber therebetween that is in fluid communication with the exit port and a first swirl ring also mounted in the body that directs a flow of ionizable gas to the plasma chamber, and a power supply and means for conducting an electrical current from the power supply to the electrode and via the plasma arc when it is in a transferred arc mode to the workpiece, said power supply including means for starting up and cutting off the current to the torch, where the improvement comprises

means for changing one parameter selected from the group consisting of the mass flow rate of the gas through the plasma chamber, the flow pattern of the gas through the plasma chamber and the combination of the mass flow rate and the gas flow pattern, and

means for operating said changing means (i) before initiating the current to produce a preflow of said gas sufficient to sustain a pilot arc, (ii) in coordina-

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tion with said pilot arc transferring to the work-piece, and (iii) before cutting off the current and for a sufficiently long time before said cutting off to reduce, wear of the electrode but a sufficiently short time before cutting off that the arc does not damage the nozzle.

24. The improvement of claim 23 wherein said parameter changing means comprises valve means for controlling the flow of the gas to the plasma chamber.

25. The improvement of claim 24 wherein said valve means closes the flow to the chamber within about 300 milliseconds before said current cut off.

26. The improvement of claim 23 wherein said parameter changing means comprises a second swirl ring with generally radial flow ports for introducing gas to the plasma chamber mounted in said torch body in combination with said first swirl ring and valve means for switching the gas flow to said plasma chamber from said first swirl ring to said second swirl ring.

27. The improvement according to claim 26 wherein said switching occurs within about 500 milliseconds of said current cut off.

28. The improvement of claim 23 wherein said parameter changing means includes vent means from said plasma chamber and valve means operable under the control of said operating means for opening and closing said vent means.

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29. The improvement of claim 23 wherein said change occurs within about 5 milliseconds of said current cut off.

30. The improvement of claim 24 wherein said valve means comprises

an infeed line to said torch,

first and second sources of the ionizable gas,

a first valve connected in a first branch conduit in series between said first source of the ionizable gas and said infeed line,

a second valve connected in a second branch conduit in series between said second source of ionizable gas and said infeed line,

a third valve in said infeed line between said branch conduits and said torch whereby opening of said first and third valves and closing said second valve produces said gas preflow, and whereby closing said first valve and opening said second and third valves produces an increased operating flow sufficient to sustain the plasma arc in a transferred mode.

31. The improvement of claim 30 wherein said parameter changing means includes first and second adjustable flow orifices in fluid communication with said second valve and said first and third valves, respectively.

32. The improvement of claim 30 wherein said second source of ionizable gas provides a flow of pure oxygen for cutting mild steel and said first source of ionizable gas provides a flow of a gas that is less reactive than pure oxygen.

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